



Testimony of

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National Service Director

Submitted for the Record

Role of National, State, and County Veteran Service Officers

Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs

House Committee on Veteran Affairs

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Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

It is my pleasure to submit this testimony for the record on behalf of AMVETS and National Commander Edward W. Kemp. AMVETS is not, nor have we been, the recipient of Federal funds of any kind at any time.

Today's Hearing is to discuss the "Role of National, State, and County Veteran Service Officers in Claims Development". Before you can discuss this issue with any kind of intelligence, you must first understand the differences between the entities.

National Service Officers are, normally, employees of select Veteran Service Organizations. Outside of the District of Columbia, to the best of my knowledge, National Service Officers are employed only by AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans (DAV), Military Order of the Purple Heart (MoPH), and the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA).

State Service Officers consist of two distinctly different programs. Veteran Service Organizations employ State or Department Service Officers in each of their "in-house" departments. AMVETS uses State Service Officers exclusively in California, Michigan, and Nevada. We also use them to supplement our National Service Officers in Illinois, Missouri, Ohio, and Washington State. The American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), and Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) use Department Service Officers throughout the Nation. The second entity that employs State Service Officers is the State Department of Veteran Affairs (sometimes known as Division of Veteran Services or Veterans Commission among other titles).

County Veteran Service Officers are an entirely different breed than the rest of us. Some County Veteran Service Officers are employed by their counties, other are employed by the State DVA, and a few are actually Chief Executives of Independent Government Agencies. They also include Tribal Service Officers employed by the various American Indian Nations of our country.

All of these men and women have different functions and I would like to focus my testimony specifically on the four areas of which I have personal knowledge; AMVETS National Service Officers, AMVETS State Service Officers, the Illinois Department of Veteran Affairs, and the Veterans Assistance Commission of McHenry County, Illinois.

The AMVETS National Service Officer (NSO) is either based in a facility of the US Department of Veteran Affairs or the US Department of Defense. Those on Military Installations work with the Transition Assistance Program, screen medical and service records for separating service members, and assist the service member in filing claims against the US Department of Veteran Affairs. These claims are normally not filed through the AMVETS NSO, but given to the veteran to file from their home of record. Those that are filed by the AMVETS NSO are handled by the Veteran Affairs Regional Office (VARO) in Winston-Salem, NC (for those east of the Mississippi River) or the VARO in Salt Lake City, UT. These NSOs will also assist local area veterans in filing

claims for benefits, filing them through the VARO having geographical jurisdiction (e.g. Naval Air Station Norfolk, VA and Langley AFB, VA go to VARO Roanoke, VA). At this juncture the AMVETS NSO based in the VARO takes over the claim. The AMVETS NSO will process and develop the claim, submit it to the Veteran Service Center (VSC) for adjudication, represent the veteran at hearings and, if necessary, with the VSC Decision Review Officer (DRO). We will advocate on behalf of the veteran, assist in the compilation of evidence, and review the rating decision. If we are dissatisfied with the rating decision, we will request a hearing or a de nouveau review. If we are unsuccessful in reversing the decision we will advise the veteran to appeal the claim with the Board of Veteran Appeals, where we will represent the claimant. We do not accept frivolous claims, nor will we represent the claimant in a frivolous appeal.

The AMVETS State Service Officers (SSO) role will vary by department. Our SSOs in California, Michigan, and Nevada perform all of the same functions as an AMVETS NSO. AMVETS SSOs in Illinois, Missouri, Ohio, and Washington State perform almost all of the same tasks as the NSO. The primary difference is that they will submit claims to the USDVA through the NSO located at the VARO, who will then take responsibility for the claim.

Relatively few of our claims come from face-to-face contact with the claimant. They are, for the most part, submitted by AMVETS SSOs, the State DVA, or the CVSO. We currently maintain 58 NSOs in 46 offices 27 states and the District of Columbia. We currently maintain SSOs as follows:

- California
 - 28 SSOs in 25 locations including Las Vegas and Reno, NV
- Illinois
 - 6 SSOs serving 10 locations
- Michigan
 - 7 SSOs in 3 locations
- Missouri
 - 4 SSOs in 4 locations
- Ohio
 - 3 SSOs serving 4 locations
- Washington
 - 3 SSOs in 2 locations

The Illinois Department of Veteran Affairs (IDVA) serves 66 of the approximately 102 counties within the state. The IDVA maintains 43 full time and 42 part time offices in these 66 counties, including a full time office at the USDVA Regional Office in Chicago. The roll of an IDVA SSO is varied. He or she does file claims on behalf of the veteran with the USDVA, but they also administer various state programs to include the issuance of free hunting and fishing licenses. For the most part, the IDVA SSO submits benefit claims to Veteran Service Organizations (VSO) located at VARO Chicago. At that point the claim is handled by either a VSO NSO or VSO SSO and the IDVA may be “out of the loop”. The training program used by IDVA personnel is inadequate at best and IDVA’s primary concern has been their Veteran’s Nursing Home Programs, with IDVA

SSOs, and their clients, suffering. Hopefully, with a recent addition to the IDVA Senior Staff that situation has, or soon will, change. Although the IDVA isn't representative of most State DVAs, it is representative of too many. The State DVAs are, in my experience, traditionally under funded and understaffed. In many States, the Director or Commissioner doesn't actually oversee a separate department, but rather a subsidiary of the Department of Military Affairs, Administrative Department, or Health and Human Services Department.

County Veteran Service Officers, as I've mentioned, represent of different types of organization. Each State's veteran statutes set it up differently. Approximately one-third of all CVSOs are actually employees of the various state governments. The remaining two-thirds are employed by their respective county governments. A somewhat smaller number of Tribal Service Officers are employed by their American Indian Nations or Tribal Governments. Two CVSO groups that I'm familiar with are set up entirely differently. Of these two, I'm only competent to discuss the Illinois Veterans Assistance Commissions (VAC). These 46 different VACs are set up as Independent Government Agencies under the Illinois Consolidated Statutes, funded by County Property Taxes, located in County facilities, they are not County employees. They are employed by a Commission made up of one member from each VSO post or chapter in the county and do not report to the county government. All of these VACs provide financial assistance to indigent veterans; approximately one-half of them provide free transportation services for veterans from the county to the nearest VA Medical Center; approximately one-third of them actually do claims work. Unfortunately, CVSOs are not normally represented at the VARO of jurisdiction. Therefore an accredited CVSO has two choices. He or she can represent the claimant themselves and travel between the county and the VARO or they can transfer the claimant to a VSO or State DVA with representation at the VARO. In actuality, very few CVSOs are able, due to distances involved, to represent their clients at the VARO. What the CVSO will concentrate on is claims development and ensuring that the VSO or SDVA receives a claim that's as ready to rate as possible. An issue that's applicable to both CVSOs and State DVAs is frivolous claims. As they are tax payer supported entities they are, in most cases, required to file any claim that a veteran wants to submit, without regard to the merits of the claim. I've seen CVSOs file a "combat rated" disability claim for a "former prisoner-of-war" who was never stationed outside of the Midwestern US. This is not the fault of the CVSO, but rather the fault of the system.

The claims development work done by service officers is primarily done by County Veteran Service Officers and State DVA personnel. Those VSO employees who perform claims development do not normally include those based in the VARO as they normally have neither the time nor the resources.

Veteran service officers, regardless of their status or their employer, are among some of the most under-paid individuals in this country. They are mostly veterans; they are mostly disabled; they do the job for the love of their brothers and sisters-in-arms not for the money or perks. A large number of CVSOs go even further by funding a veteran's needs out of his or her own pocket because their budget is exhausted. Those that do the job should be applauded.

The biggest difference between service officers is their training program. Each VSO conducts its own training program. In AMVETS, a new NSO is given a week or more of supervised on-the-job-instruction as well as classroom training provided by the VARO. We also bring them altogether, annually, for three days of advanced Continuing Education. Our SSOs are given annual training by senior NSOs and National Service Department management personnel, usually for a week and usually in the SSOs home state. State Departments of Veteran Affairs normally conduct their own in-house training. The National Association of County Veteran Service Officers (NACVSO) conducts extensive training for their CVSOs, training that is often attended by State DVA personnel and some VSO personnel. NACVSO will send teams of trainers to various states to conduct regional training. In addition, they hold an annual training seminar which provides five levels of training to attendees. They conduct TRIP training as mandated by USDVA, an Introduction to Service Officer course, a basic Accreditation Course of 32 hours, an annual 16 hour Continuing Education course, and an annual 8 hour advanced training course leading to certification as a "Certified Veterans Advocate". This last course can take between five and seven years to complete, only 4 certifications have ever been awarded, and they were all awarded in 2006.

It would appear to me that the focus on this Committee should not be the Role of National, State, and County Veteran Service Officers in Claim Development but rather the type of training these individuals must have to perform their job. I believe that all veteran service officers, regardless of affiliation or status, must be properly trained. Proper training, at a minimum, must include at least 32 hours of basic classroom instruction and 16 hours of annual continuing education. It is my professional opinion that this training should be conducted by the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers or at least modeled on their program. Accreditation by the USDVA should be based on successfully completing the basic course, including a written exam, annual Continuing Education, and a written examination at least every five years.

On the subject of accreditation, no VSO or other organization accredits a service officer. They recommend accreditation of service officers to the General Counsel of the USDVA, who grants accreditation – eventually. Since these service officers are, in fact, accredited by an agency of the Federal Government, why are they (we) held to such strict access of files. As the National Service Director of AMVETS I've been accredited for over 9 years, but if a claimant calls me with an issue, I must refer him some where else as I do not have access to the VBA files that all of my NSOs have access to. Additionally, in order to represent a claimant the claimant must sign a VA Form 21-22 giving us their "Power of Attorney". That's well and good for the VSOs, however once that happens the State DVA and/or CVSO are cut out of the loop. Unless they are cross accredited through a VSO and have remote access to VBA computer systems they can actually provide no additional real claims service to their client. However, the veteran doesn't care about that. What the veteran knows is that he went to his State DVA rep or his CVSO and filed a claim. When he has a question or a problem, he's not going to drive to the VARO to speak with his VSO service officer, he's going back to the same state or county office to see the same individual he saw the first time. It is my professional opinion that State DVA Service

Officers, County Veteran Service Officers, and Tribal Service Officers, as employees of state and local government and accredited by the federal government, can best serve their clients by being granted “blanket accreditation”. The USDVA could/should allow these individuals read-only access to the VBA electronic claim files for every veteran residing within their jurisdiction regardless of who holds the “Power of Attorney”. The goal here is to serve the needs of the veteran, not the needs of the service officer.

That concludes my testimony. I will be in attendance at the hearing. Thank you.



**James W. "Jim" Doran
National Service Director**

James W. Doran joined AMVETS as the National Service Director (NSD) on March 10, 2003. As NSD he oversees the operations of 46 AMVETS Service Offices located in 27 states and the District of Columbia. His staff of 58 provides assistance to veterans in filing claims for benefits with the US Department of Veteran Affairs. He also coordinates with many State Departments of Veteran Affairs and County Veteran Service Officers nationally.

Jim served in the United States Navy from January 1963 to July 1983, retiring as a CWO4. His Naval Career included service in Attack Squadron 52 aboard USS Ticonderoga (CVA-14) from January 1964 to July 1966. He made two deployments to the South China Sea during this period of time and was involved in the Tonkin Gulf Incident in August 1964. He served in the Mekong Delta with Helicopter Attack (Light) Squadron 3 from January to July 1971, when he was promoted to Warrant Officer. He also served aboard USS Constellation (CVA-64) from October 1971 to July 1974. During this period of time, he made two additional deployments to the South China Sea. Jim served in Attack Squadron 85 aboard USS Forrestal (CV-59) in 1976 and 1977, in Fighter Squadron 14 aboard USS John F. Kennedy (CV-67) in 1978 and 1979, and in Fighter Squadron 142 aboard USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN-69) from 1981 to 1983.

Jim's military awards include the Navy Commendation Medal for Heroism (1965), the Combat Action Ribbon (1971), the Navy Achievement Medal (1980), two Presidential Unit Citations and one Navy Unit Citation for service in Vietnam, the Navy Expeditionary Medal (Lebanon), the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal (Lebanon), the Vietnamese Service Medal with 10 Campaign Stars, and two Vietnamese Meritorious Unit Citations (Cross of Gallantry with Palm and Civil Actions with Palm).

Jim served as Chief Executive Officer of the Veterans Assistance Commission of McHenry County, Illinois from September 1998 until March 2003. He is a life member of AMVETS Post 269 (IL), VFW Post 8097 (MD) and was Post Commander of VFW Post 4600 (IL), Disabled American Veterans, Vietnam Veterans of America, and the Association of Aviation Ordnancemen. He also belongs to the American Legion (Post 60, MD) and the Military Officers Association of America. Jim is past Secretary and past Legislative Chairman for the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers and past Regional Vice President of the Illinois Association of County Veterans Assistance Commissions. He currently serves as Chairman of the Needs of Young Veterans Issues Committee. He also served as a member of the American Liver Society Committee on Hepatitis C and on the Veterans Advisory Committee on Rehabilitation.

Jim has two children (James Doran of Laramie, WY and Julie Sherman of Virginia Beach, VA) and two grand daughters. He and his wife, Charlotte, reside near Maryland City, Maryland.